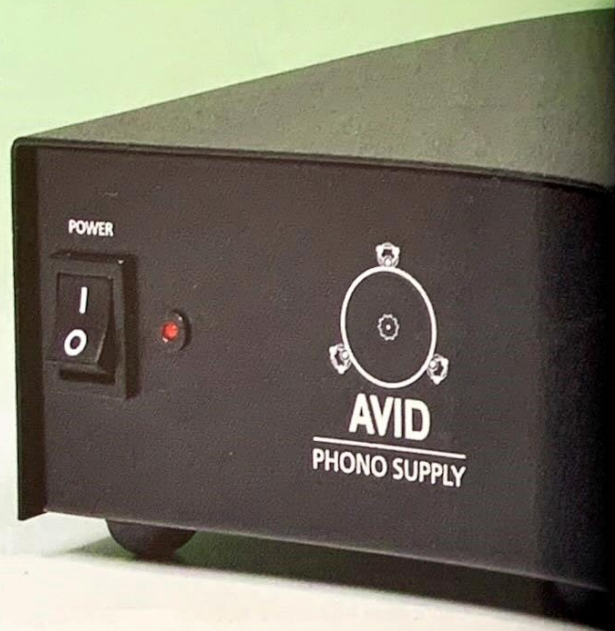


# Ray Of Light

Avid's new Pulsus is a shining example of a modern solid-state phono stage, says David Price...



Conrad Mas obviously has ants in his pants, as his company Avid can't sit still. Last year, amidst the depths of the recession, he confessed to me that whilst so much of the industry had retrenchment fever, hurriedly cutting product lines, destocking and trying to save every last ha'ppeny bit, Avid was on the march.

It was a long time ago since Avid launched its first turntable, but the company has burgeoned since. We've recently seen more and more turntables at differing price points (previously Avid was strictly medium high end; now they go down almost to budget price points and right up to Russian oil billionaire level), there's the promise of several new tonearms and now a range of electronics too. Don't think Conrad is content to stop at phono stages though; it seems he's up for taking the fight to the amplifier market too!

The Pulsus is the entry level Avid phono stage, costing an honest £1,000 which puts it into contention with a number of very accomplished performers. Avid say it's basically a low calorie version of the high end Pulsare, "Many of the Pulsare's features have been retained such as the switchable flexibility and separate power supply", they say. It's said to be designed from "first principles", and is an unbalanced design, but one that still attempts to keep noise

exceptionally low.

Pulsus employs quality components; inputs and outputs are gold-plated RCA. Gain, resistance and capacitance are all easily adjustable from the underside of the casework and offer real flexibility. A passive RIAA (with Neumann HF correction) circuit using high-end capacitors is said to help maintain linearity of reproduction; and an external 35VA regulated power supply is used. It offers switchable gain of variously, 48dB, 60dB, 70dB and resistance loading of 100R, 300R, 500R, 1k, 5k, 10k, 47k and capacitance loading of 100pf, 200pf and 500pf.

Everything from PCB assembly, testing and quality control to the casework is produced in house. The two cases (the actual amplifier unit and the power supply) both measure a compact 120x220x70mm, and come in decently finished matt black painted pressed steel. This isn't exceptional in any way, but is neatly functional and in no way inferior to the standards of the £1,000 class; the ANT Audio Kora 3T Ltd. which I pitted the Pulsus against is hardly an Emille Allure in terms of finish and build either!

## SOUND QUALITY

If you've ever auditioned Avid turntables before, you'll know they have a distinctive sound; think big, widescreen, 'architectural', panoramic, dynamic, explicit and forceful, with a nice measure of subtlety mixed in for good measure. Such is the Pulsus; it's no shrinking violet as far as phono stages go. Instead of being one of those late night, whiskey fuelled, jazz bar ambience designs, all silky and smoochy and smokey, the Avid cuts to the musical chase.

Talk Talk's 'Talk Talk' was a great showcase for its talents; a thumping early eighties slice of

power pop, produced to thrill with passion and pace. The Pulsus set up a very wide soundstage across the room, dropping back more than I'd expected at the price, and located instruments with pin-point precision. Crashing piano chords, jagged guitar riffs and those heavily compressed, processed vocals all ushered forth from the Avid at breakneck speed. It was particularly interested in the attack transients of the Linn drums, pushing them to the fore with utter belief. By contrast, my reference ANT Audio Kora 3T Ltd. seemed a tad subdued, more backward in coming forward, if you pardon the phrase. There was more energy from the Avid, and a complete sense of self-belief that made it a hoot to hear.

The pattern continued with Fun Lovin' Criminals' 'King of New York'; the Pulsus obviously loves pacey pop, dance or rap, as it thumped the song out with covering bass, giving the lie to any claim that Compact Disc is able to equal vinyl in this respect. Fast, punchy, fluid and rollickingly good fun to listen to, the Avid set up a bass groove that had me on the edge of my luxuriously appointed sofa, transported to a far more intense environment. Across the mid the Pulsus showed its special strengths, throwing out an ethereal trumpet sound, and giving real bite and grain to vocals. Up top, this phono stage didn't guild the lily; whereas the ANT Audio was a touch silkier and glossier, the Avid delivered a lovely 'live' hi hat cymbal sound, sharp and hard and biting, punching out of an inky black soundstage.

Feed it some classic techno in the shape of Kraftwerk's 'Computer Welt' and the Avid again impressed; it was controlled, detailed and utterly assured in the large soundstage it set up. All the different strands of the mix were positioned precisely,





this new phono stage doing just the right thing when the heavily vocoded "Computerwelt" refrain kicked in, by panning the sound extreme stage left and right. Meanwhile, a powerful, insistent bass line warbled along in the background, counterpointed by lots of lovely midband detailing as elements of the electronic percussion backing jumped out at me. Again, treble was open and spacious, yet had real bite.

So far, the Avid was giving the much loved ANT Audio reference a seriously hard time (and this is a phono stage I've heard humble countless far more expensive ones), but moving to the cool jazz/rare groove strains of Donald Byrd's 'Streetlady' and things didn't hold up quite so well. The Avid always seemed to want to turn the delicate rhythms of soul music into four-on-the-floor pounding rock. It wasn't in any way an unpleasant experience, the Pulsus injecting real life into the proceedings and making the track an exuberant audio experience. But I did feel there was a just a touch more delicacy to the ANT, which seemed to take music more on its own terms, rather than trying to impose a rigour all of its own. The result was that, via the Kora 3T, the track 'ilted' more, sounding more of an emotional whole, whereas the Avid simply made it sound big, punchy and powerful.

This became the template for the

Avid. It's a great listener, but it loves rock and pop, whereas with jazz and classical things lack that last ounce of subtlety, delicacy and mellifluousness. Tonally, the ANT was more 'holistic', unlocking the natural 'flavour' of acoustic instruments better. In no way was the Avid poor in this respect, it's just that it seems more purposed towards high octane stadium rock, and less sympathetic to the delicate textures of the piano in Debussy's 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair', from a much loved Hong Kong Chinese Philips pressing of his Preludes. The Avid caught the piano's dynamic 'light and shade' brilliantly, but lacked that last nth degree of fluidity and repose that the ANT Audio threw to the fore.

### CONCLUSION

Hear is a super £1,000 phono stage. In an already cut-throat group the Avid Pulsus comes straight in to the top five, in my view, from nowhere. Indeed, if you're a fan of powerful rock and

pop, it's highly likely to make your own personal number one spot. Of course, phono stages are very personal things, which is why an audition is always essential, but Avid has certainly distinguished itself with the Pulsus; it's the personification of power and passion in a market that doesn't have enough of it.

### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Pulsus measured 0Hz-27kHz (+1dB), MM and MC sharing the same signal path. As gain had not dropped at 1Hz it appears the amp is all direct coupled, hence our d.c. spec. Equalisation was very accurate right across the audio band, our analysis shows, but there is no drop in gain below 20Hz so warps around 5Hz will be amplified and there is no warp filter to counteract this. Gain above 20kHz rose slightly, but this is not uncommon or especially consequential.

Gain values were useful for MM and MC, ranging from x225 (47dB) up to x4181 (72dB) with both High and Low MC selected. It's a broad range that should cope with all cartridges, even some of the super low output types like the Goldring Legacy and Linns. A maximum output swing of 10V sets the input overload ceiling, in conjunction with gain, and MM overloads at 44mV and MC High at 3mV, satisfactory figures.

Noise was low, if not very low; there are quieter phono stages but the

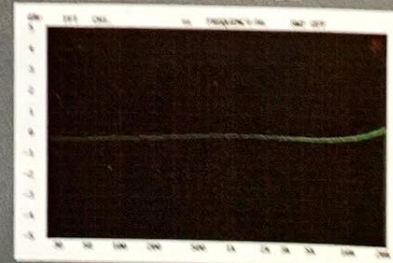
0.09uV of input noise at full gain (i.e. MC High) is fairly low all the same and hiss should not be a problem.

The Pulsus measured well enough in all areas. Whilst it will have obviously open and strong bass, warped discs are likely to cause cone flap in reflex loudspeakers. NK

Disc MM / MC  
Frequency response (MM & MC)

	0Hz-27kHz
Separation	98dB
Noise (e.i.n. A wtd)	0.1uV
Distortion	0.003%
Gain (MM / MC)	47, 59, 71dB
Overload	10V out

### FREQUENCY RESPONSE



### VERDICT

Propulsive, expansive sound puts this right at the top of the £1,000 phono stage tree.

**AVID PULSUS** £1,000

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### FOR

- power, precision, grip
- pinpoint soundstaging
- flexibility

### AGAINST

- suits rock and pop best